



Exploring Norwegian Sailor and Seaman Records

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This class is designed to teach family history researchers how to find sailors (military) and seamen (civilian workers) in the records for Norway as well as learn what kind of information is available in these records.

Objectives:

Patrons will be able to find:

- Sailors (military) from 1600s – 1900s
- Seamen (civilian workers) early to 1900s

Background:

The history of shipping in Norway often begins with the Vikings, but the road to today has been long and strenuous. The strong and sustained growth did not come until the second half of the 19th century. At that time, almost the entire world was opened to Norwegian shipping, and they enjoyed the experience and competence as shipowners and sailors. Shipping created jobs and investment opportunities, and this to a far greater extent than in other countries in Europe. Where the Swedes had forests and industry, the Norwegians had shipping.

People in Norway have always been a seafaring people. There are records as early as the Vikings 793-900 or even earlier of Norwegians traveling by ships. During the Nordic Iron age (500 BC-800 AD) Vikings adapted letters and created their own alphabet called runes. Trading with Romans took place, typically furs and skin for luxury goods.

Early on Norwegians traveled to the sparsely populated areas of Shetland, Orkney, the Faroe Islands and the Hebrides to colonize. They were great navigators of ships already pre-year 800.

Norwegians left Norway around mid to late 800s and settled Iceland. There are stories of Norwegian going to India in the 800s where they purchased the spice *Kardemomme* (Cardamom) which is still in use in Norway today.

There was also much interaction between the British and the Norwegian and the Name York or Yorkshire comes from an old Viking farm named Jørvik. Genetical studies has

shown that the people in York are closer to the Norwegians than the British a couple of shires away.

There were many interactions between the Norwegians and the Dutch in the 1600s as they were both a great seafaring people. Norwegians settled in Holland and people from Holland settled in Norway. Many Norwegians traveled with the Dutch to America in the 1600s, and since both used a patronymic naming system are not hard to find in the new country.

Norwegians have been in New York since the 1600s. Dutch ships and colonizing in what would become present day New York, had Norwegian sailors as part of their crews. Hans Hansen Bergen (1610-1654) of Bergen, Norway was one of the earliest settlers in Dutch New Amsterdam. A shipwright by trade, he became a large property owner in Brooklyn, Bergen married Sarah Rapelje, the first female of European descent born in New Amsterdam. Both family names live on as street names in Brooklyn. In the following centuries Norwegian sailors and captain continued to be hired to sail to the area, and some of them stayed.

During the Middle Ages, the Hanseatic League took control of trade in Northern Europe. Not until the seventeenth century was Norway once again in position to rebuild its fleet.

The Norwegian merchant fleet continued to prosper during the eighteenth century, and Norwegian shipping sailed to more distant waters.

See link to early maritime history in Norway:

<https://sjofartsmuseum.museumvest.no/english/about-our-exhibitions/>

Culture:

When discussing culture, we must mention both maritime and Norwegian culture. By maritime culture is meant that the Norwegians are a people who live by the sea. As sailors, Norwegians identified themselves as a shipping nation as early as the beginning of the 1900s. Norwegian culture means the way they were organized. They were small communities where shipping was one of the most important industries. Norwegians were small communities where shipping was one of the most important industries, and where trust played a key role. This affected their attitude and values.

See link: https://localwiki.org/hsl/Norwegian_Sailors

20th Century

At the start of the 20th century Norway had the fourth largest merchant fleet in the world. The fleet served customers all over the world, and its flag was everywhere. Norwegian ships were anchored in or voyaging between ports all over the world, facilitating the growth of commerce and enabling the formation of a truly international economy. Through ships, sailors and shipowners, this small country on the outskirts of Europe reached far.

Norway had the world's largest merchant marine, trailing only supremely dominant Great Britain – with around half of the world's seaborne transport capacity-Germany and

the United States. Around 6.6 per cent of the sailing fleet and 3.6 per cent of the steamship fleet were flying the Norwegian flag.

Shipping continued to increase in importance after an international comparison. Norway's merchant marine amounted to 1227 tons per 1000 inhabitants – so the average Norwegian owned more than one ton of shipping tonnage. The shipping capacity per capita was high-much higher than the UK in second place, more than three times higher than Denmark in third place and more than four times higher than fourth-place Greece. In other words, no country has put such a large share of its investments in ships. No country depended as much on shipping.

Getting started: Find an ancestor living close to one of the ports.

The main ports are Oslo, Kristiansand, Stavanger, Bergen, Kristiansund and Trondheim.

You may want to search for an ancestor in the church, moving or census records which may very well indicate that he went to sea. In cities such as Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Kristiansand and Kristiansund there are many males who hired on a ship. The pay was great, and this made for good income for a family. Even in the 1700s there are records of the people living close to Kristiansand and how well the sailors and their families did financially.

The early records pre-1800 may only give a name of a person, but later records mid - 1800s and later will often give name, date of birth, place of birth as well as the name of his parents and address where he lived within a city. It will also list date of hire, name of ship and name of port of departure as well as port of arrival (within the country or abroad).

If your ancestor was a skipper or a *styrmann* (helmsman) his salary was much higher than a regular worker, therefore it is a good idea to follow a person and watch as he was schooled and moved up in his profession.